

3. CHARLOTTE BRONTË

(Yorkshire, 21st April 1816 – 31st March 1855)



English novelist and poet, the eldest of the Brontë sisters, she wrote *Jane Eyre* (1847) under the pen name of Currer Bell: she was persuaded to reveal her identity by her publisher once the novel enjoyed huge, unexpected success sparking a movement in regards to feminism in literature.

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- **1816:** born in Thornton, Yorkshire, she was the third of six children – her father was an Irish Anglican clergyman, vicar at St. Peter's Church at Hartshead –

Charlotte would eventually base her novel *Shirley* on the area.

- **1820:** the family moved a few miles to Haworth in the care of Elizabeth Branwell, their aunt, after Mrs. Brontë's death in 1821.
- **1824:** Charlotte was sent to the Clergy Daughters' School – its poor conditions permanently affected her health and physical development and hastened the deaths of her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who died of tuberculosis in June 1825. Soon after their father removed them from the school.



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At home she and the other surviving children (**Branwell**, talented but weak, **Emily**, who would become famous for her novel *Wuthering Heights* **Anne**, author of the novel *Agnes Grey*) began writing elaborate sagas on the inhabitants of their imaginary kingdoms.



- **1831-32:** Charlotte continued her education at Roe Head, returning there as a teacher in **1835**.
- **1839-41:** she took up the first of many positions as governess to various families in Yorkshire but in **1842-43** she and Emily travelled to Brussels to enroll in a boarding school where, in return for board and tuition, Charlotte taught English and Emily taught music.

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- **1846:** Charlotte, Emily, and Anne published a collection of poems under the names of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Only **two copies** were **sold** but the sisters continued writing for publication and began their first novels.

In the years which followed Branwell and Emily (1848) as well as Anne (1849) died: Charlotte was left alone with her aging father.

- **1854:** she married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father's curate – she became pregnant soon after the marriage but her health declined rapidly .
- **1855:** she died, along with her unborn child, at the young age of 38.

Jane Eyre (1847)

- *Jane Eyre* is a first-person narrative of the title character which goes through five distinct stages:
 1. Jane's **childhood** at *Gateshead*, where she is emotionally and physically abused by her aunt and cousins;
 2. her **education** at *Lowood School*, where she acquires friends and role models but also suffers privations and oppression;
 3. her time as the **governess** of *Thornfield Hall*, where she falls in love with her Byronic employer, Edward Rochester;
 4. a period at *Moor House* with the **Rivers family** during which her earnest but cold clergyman-cousin St John Rivers acts as a spiritual guide, proposes to her and suggests a missionary life;
 5. her **reunion with and marriage** to her beloved Rochester.



Jane Eyre (2)



- The novel merges three distinct genres:
 - it has the form of a *Bildungsroman*, a story about a child's maturation, focusing on the emotions and experiences that accompany growth to adulthood;
 - it also contains much *social criticism*, with a strong sense of morality at its core;

- it has the brooding, moody quality and a mystery character typical of *Gothic fiction*.
 - It is considered ahead of its time, a **proto-feminist novel** since it portrays the evolution of a thinking, individualistic, passionate young woman, who desires a full life but is also highly moral and capable of making difficult choices.



Jane Eyre: literary achievement



- *Jane Eyre* had enormous success, so Charlotte was persuaded by her publisher to visit London every now and then, and reveal her true identity: she began to move in more exalted social circles, becoming friends with writers like **Elizabeth Gaskell** and **William M. Thackeray**.

- The novel sparked a movement in regards to **feminism in literature**: the main character was a parallel to her, a very strong woman and yet this is how Charlotte was described...

“... a tiny, delicate, serious, little lady, with fair straight hair, and steady eyes... Every one waited for the brilliant conversation which never began at all. Miss Brontë retired to the sofa in the study, and murmured a low word now and then to our kind governess... It was one of the dullest evenings... ever spent...”

Jane Eyre: themes

- **God and religion** are foremost in the novel:
 - Jane endeavours to attain a balance between moral duty and earthly happiness honouring traditional morality;
 - religion acts to moderate her behaviour, not to repress her true self;
 - happiness is complete only when atonement and forgiveness are attained.
- **Love and passion** are fundamental themes: a life that is not lived passionately is not lived fully.
 - *Real love* (Jane + Rochester) will be rewarded.
 - *False loves* (Bertha + Rochester, Blanche Ingram + Rochester, St. John Rivers + Jane) will simply not make it.
- The novel is a plea for the recognition of **the individual's worth**: Jane demands to be treated as an independent human being, a person with her own needs and talents.

Equality and freedom.

- **Women and men** should enjoy equal rights and be given **equal opportunities**: this is what Jane/Charlotte believes.

*“... Women feel just as men feel; **they need exercise for their faculties**... they suffer from too rigid a constraint precisely as men would suffer... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex...” (ch. 12)*

and when Jane, misinterpreting Rochester’s wedding plans, believes that she has to leave him for good she cries

*“... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even of mortal flesh: – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave and we stood at God’s feet, equal. – as we are!” and later
“... I am a **free human being with an independent will**...” (ch. 23)*